

1 CHAIRMAN JAMES: Mr. Bill Baker?

2 MR. BAKER: Yes. Thank you.

3 CHAIRMAN JAMES: I'm going to ask our timer to move
4 in a little bit further. I think you're out of the line of view
5 of our -- and they can't see you.

6 COMMISSIONER LOESCHER: Madam Chairman, if the
7 gentleman who just spoke, if he could leave his testimony, I'm
8 sure you have more in there.

9 CHAIRMAN JAMES: All of them are invited to do that.
10 Mr. Baker?

11 MR. BAKER: Yes. Madam Chairwoman and person and
12 distinguished members of the commission. My name is Bill Baker.
13 I'm vice-president of human resources for Grand Casino, Tunica,
14 and I'm here to share with a partnership that I think is making a
15 tremendous difference in the Mississippi Delta.

16 It was an idea, which came to life in Gulfport,
17 Mississippi in 1993, when Gulfport -- Grand Casino Gulfport
18 adopted a public housing project called Lander Homes. Our
19 experiences in helping the residents of that neighborhood regain
20 control of their community and begin to celebrate life and hope
21 for their future was the genesis of our Adopt-a-Town projects in
22 the Delta.

23 On any given day of the year, there are 500 to 800
24 job openings spread among the casinos in Tunica County. With our
25 robust economy, the north Mississippian- Memphis job markets can
26 no longer meet the staffing needs of the casinos.

27 The well documented poverty of Tunica County in the
28 years before gaming arrived is beginning to disappear. However,
29 you only have to drive 30 or 40 miles south to realize that

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1 opportunities in Tunica County have had little influence on the
2 residents within the scores of small towns which dot the Delta.

3 The lack of reliable transportation and a large
4 population which had never held steady employment were seemingly
5 insurmountable barriers.

6 L. Jones, manager of the Mississippi Employment
7 Security Commission office in Clarksdale, Mississippi was
8 contacted to assist in identifying the areas of highest
9 unemployment within his jurisdiction. Marks and Jonestown, with
10 unemployment in excess of 28 percent each, were chosen.

11 The decision was to develop a community based
12 employment program which would be supported locally by the
13 mayors, church ministers and influential business leaders within
14 each community. The process begins with a bi-weekly job fair in
15 each town to recruit candidates for a one-week job readiness
16 training program which takes place within each of the adopted
17 communities.

18 Upon completion of the training, jobs are offered
19 immediately to those who have successfully completed job
20 readiness. For those without reliable transportation, Grand
21 Casino provides transportation for up to six months.

22 Thanks to Tulahoma Community College's skill tech
23 center, we have been able to develop relevant instructional
24 material and outstanding training support for these initiatives.

25 We continue to work with the Mississippi Department
26 of Transportation and the Aaron Henry Community Health Center in
27 Clarksdale to develop an effective rural transportation system,
28 which I'm so happy to say is now in the progress of being
29 completed.

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1 The opportunities to positively impact the population
2 of the Mississippi Delta seem endless. We know that many of the
3 people in Jonestown and Marks are beginning to dream about a
4 future they never thought possible only a few short months ago.
5 So what's happened?

6 Adopt-a-Town process began in September 1997. To
7 date, we have employed 235 individuals from this program. Their
8 retention rate is 81 percent versus a retention rate of 39
9 percent for our overall population, which is phenomenal given
10 welfare to work statistics that you hear from around the country.

11 We have hired 323 associates overall into our
12 workforce in the last year that have come off welfare rolls
13 directly into our employment. We have supported our commitment
14 to these communities by supporting their child care center.

15 We've redone a community center in Jonestown. We
16 sent ten kids to a basketball camp this summer and we had a day
17 camp for 200 children in Jonestown this past summer. It's a
18 partnership that's working. Thank you.

19 CHAIRMAN JAMES: Thank you very much.

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